

A HISTORY OF THE SILVER AND MINOR
COINS OF THE UNITED STATES

BY

ROBERT H YEATMAN

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SUMMARY

A short history of the minting
of silver and minor coins in
the United States for the period
from the colonial era to 1942
is presented.

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COLONIAL BEGINNINGS:

During the early colonial period nearly all of the colonies issued their own minor coins instead of using the coinage of the mother country England. Since the facilities available were rather inadequate, some of the coins were crudely struck, but others were as fine in every detail as the coins in circulation to-day. Notable among these early coins were the Oak and Pine Tree shillings issued in 1652 by the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1722 small coins were so scarce that it was necessary to import certain coins such as the "Wood's Cent" from Britain.

The Latin motto "E Pluribus Unum", which is found on many present day coins, was inscribed on several of the early coins.

FIRST COINAGE IN THE UNITED STATES:

The first coin struck by an authority of the United States (this occurred while the Articles of Confederation was in effect) was the "Fugio" cent in 1787. This coin was designed by Benjamin Franklin.

With the adoption of the Constitution in 1788 the right of coinage was removed from the states and placed solely in the hands of the federal government. However, this power was not exercised until several years later when the new government organized a mint which was established in 1792 at Philadelphia. The following year this mint began operating. The only coins struck by this mint in its initial year of operation were the one-half cent and large one cent pieces. The next year the mint began the striking of half-dimes, half dollars, and silver dollars. In 1796 the first dimes and quarter-dollars were minted.

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EXPANSION OF THE COINAGE:

The Philadelphia mint continued striking all coins until 1838 when because of the expansion of the United States it was found necessary to establish a new mint at New Orleans, Louisiana.

The ten years before the Civil War saw many changes in the United States coinage. In 1851 the coining of silver three cent pieces was started. Another mint was established in 1854 at San Francisco, California. In 1857, in order to conserve metal and to provide coins which were easier to handle the coinage of large cents was suspended, and the minting of small cents (such as are in circulation now) was started. The minting of one-half cent pieces ceased during the same year.

THE EFFECT OF THE CIVIL WAR ON THE COINAGE:

The outbreak of the Civil War and the secession of Louisiana brought about the closing of the New Orleans mint. During the war and post-war periods there was an extreme scarcity of small coins throughout the country. Various attempts were made to relieve this situation. The government issued paper fractional currency in values of \$0.03, \$0.05, \$0.10, \$0.15, \$0.25, and \$0.50. Also, the people started using postage stamps in place of coins, this led to the placing of postage stamps in small metal frames to protect them from wear. This type of currency became known as "encased postage stamps".

This period was also marked by the appearance of hundreds of varieties of tokens issued by private merchants. Although these tokens had no face value, they were accepted by the people as legal tender.

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New coins were also minted by the government to aid in relieving the shortage of small coins. In 1864 two cent pieces appeared and two years later the nickel five cent pieces were first coined. In 1870 a mint was placed in operation in Carson City, Nevada.

THE "REVOLUTION" IN UNITED STATES COINAGE:

Following the Post-Civil War period drastic changes took place in the United States coinage. The minting of two cent pieces, silver three cent pieces, and half-dimes ceased in 1873. In 1875 silver twenty cent pieces appeared, however, they were only minted until 1878. The New Orleans mint was reopened in 1879. Three years later the first of a long series of commemorative half-dollars, the Columbian appeared.

THE COINAGE SINCE 1900:

In 1906 a mint was established at Denver, Colorado. Three years later the mint at New Orleans was discontinued. In the same year, the appearance of the Lincoln cent marked the first time in the history of the United States that a president was honored by the appearance of his likeness on a regular issue coin.

The following thirty-odd years were uneventfull. However, the Second World War has brought about several changes in the United States coinage. In 1942, in order to release copper for strategic war industries the composition of the five cent pieces was changed from a copper-nickel alloy to one of silver, ~~ma~~ **nganese**, and nickel. Also, the composition of the one cent piece was changed from bronze to steel plated with a heavy coat of zinc.

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